DAWN

OPINION

At long last

IT was a long time coming. On Friday, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq formally declared veteran politician Mehmood Khan Achakzai as Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly. Regardless of how long the appointment was delayed by that point, it reflects positively on both the government and the opposition that it was finally done. Just about a month and a half ago, Mr Sadiq had curtly interrupted PTI chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan when the latter referred to Mr Achakzai as "the opposition leader" during a heated debate in the House over remarks made by Mr Achakzai that Mr Sadiq had taken umbrage to. "I do not recognise him in that capacity," Mr Sadiq was reported to have shot back, reminding the House that though Mr Achakzai may be the opposition's joint nominee, he still needed the Speaker's blessing to be recognised as such. Clearly, much has changed since then. And, it seems, for the better.

Mr Achakzai, chief of the ambitiously named Tehreek Tahaffuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan and the PkMAP political party, is an old hand in Pakistani politics. He has a long and storied history of uniting pro-democracy forces, and was previously allied with both Nawaz Sharif and the late Benazir Bhutto in their respective struggles for democracy in Pakistan. It was, no doubt, quite a surprise when jailed former prime minister Imran Khan 'nominated' him as opposition leader on behalf of his party. The PTI often comes across as a party that regards no one as even equal to, let alone better than, its own leaders. That Mr Khan still chose to place and reiterate, on multiple occasions, his trust in Mr Achakzai is a testament to a view of Mr Achakzai's politics as unimpeachable. It also reflects an admission that none of Mr Khan's lieutenants were considered capable of the kind of principled oppositional politics Mr Achakzai is known for.

Regardless, this is a positive development in Pakistani politics, and it is hoped that wisdom will continue to prevail. Mr Achakzai is known for taking a more traditional approach to politics. He understands the need for negotiations, as reflected in recent moves by the TTAP to restart dialogue between the government and the opposition. Of late, he has been vocal in defending the Constitution, demanding the release of political prisoners and criticising undemocratic practices. His political oeuvre indicates that his politics are consistent and non-opportunistic. He has hardly been known to compromise on his core principles even under pressure. It is a relief that the mantle has passed to a leader of his calibre. It is hoped that he can break the political deadlock. Respected on both sides of the aisle, he may be one of the few who can still make it happen.

Car policy reset

THE government's decision to finally scrap the much-abused 'personal baggage scheme', long exploited by commercial traders as a backdoor for the wholesale import of used cars, is a long-overdue policy correction. The changes to the policy also tighten existing rules and introduce new restrictions on vehicle imports under the 'transfer of residence and gift schemes', which should minimise imports for commercial objectives while recalibrating them for their original purpose of facilitating overseas Pakistanis. The decision allowing the import of only up to three-year-old cars under these schemes will also limit inflow and prevent the country from becoming a junkyard for discarded cars.

The data shared by the All Pakistan Motor Dealers Association, the main beneficiary of the unchecked import of used cars, underscores the importance of this policy shift. The influx of 40,000 refurbished cars in FY25 and another 18,000 units in the first half of FY26 under the personal baggage route shows how these schemes increasingly distorted the domestic market and undermined the viability of local assemblers. The industry had long clamoured for such a policy reset, particularly in light of the country's extremely low domestic sales volumes compared to those of South and Southeast Asian economies. Calls for this policy shift had gathered momentum in recent years as competition for a shrinking domestic market intensified with the entry of Korean and Chinese brands amid a massive inflow of old cars that put greater stress on local assemblers. The move is expected to provide assemblers much-needed breathing space until economic growth resumes and sales begin to recover. That said, it must be underscored that this policy reform shifts the onus squarely onto carmakers to respond to consumer needs — not only by diversifying into entry-level models but also by reducing prices. Past experience shows that manufacturers have been able to cut prices sharply when faced with competition, underscoring the extent of the margins they have been earning. These reductions can be made sustainable through deeper localisation of parts, particularly hi-tech components. The government can chip in by slashing its taxes. At the same time, assemblers should explore export opportunities to build volume and lower unit costs. Failure to respond to consumer expectations could once again prompt the government to reverse course.

Pension bottleneck

WHILE the payment of pensions, especially in the public sector, is a major financial challenge for the state, particularly due to the large number of retirees, these woes are exacerbated by bureaucratic lethargy. The delayed pensions of former employees of the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology appears to be a case of the latter. Retired employees and teachers of the varsity recently protested outside the Karachi Press Club, urging the prime minister to help clear their outstanding dues. They said that their pensions had been held up for the past five months; in fact, some former employees had passed away while waiting for their dues. The problem is not new. In October 2024, the federal ombudsman had advised the university management to "immediately rectify" the issue, while noting that the bottleneck was mainly caused by the institution's "financial mismanagement". After probing the matter, the federal body had further instructed Fuuast to use the surplus funds its Islamabad campus possessed to clear the liabilities of former staffers of the Karachi campus. Considering such clear instructions, it is a matter of concern that the issue has not been resolved.

For many senior citizens, pensions are their only source of income, and withholding these due to official ineptitude, and without any solid reason, is an exercise in utter cruelty. The Fuaast employees' issue should be resolved at the earliest, while other government departments that have been delaying payments to former employees should also ensure that pension and related dues are transferred to ex-staffers without delay, and in a transparent manner. While pension reform is certainly needed, especially when one considers the fragile health of the public exchequer, and while fraudulent claims must be weeded out, withholding pensions when funds are available should not be tolerated. In these times of economic distress and high prices, blocking and delaying payments to retirees is unconscionable.

BY AHMER BILAL SOOFI

An opportunity for states

When the US exits, it allows alternative visions of the global order to gain legitimacy.

THE withdrawal of the US from 66 international organisations has not been noticed enough given the focus on President Donald Trump forcibly arresting the Venezuelan president, claiming to govern his country and then openly threatening to annex Greenland. In fact, the Greenland Annexation and Statehood Act bill has also been tabled. Nato members are struggling to find the right words to respond to the US and to President Trump who seems not to care even if Nato members ask him to remove bases and nuclear warheads from their territories. The intervention spree is spreading well beyond the Monroe Doctrine, although this doctrine should have been discarded after the 1945 UN Charter as it was contradicting politically what was being committed legally.

The direction where US policies were heading was correctly read by Russia and China a decade ago well before Trump's first tenure when in a surprise move both the states in 2016 came out with a Joint Declaration on International Law against unilateralism.

More recently, the biggest operational signalling was made when the US Department of Defence was renamed the Department of War through Executive Order 14347. Anyone with an interest in international law would have rightly conjectured that the Trump administration's legal team was preparing internally and externally for something unusual. The UN Charter had established a new norm against war, declaring it illegal, and replacing the word with the legal term 'use of force', which, too, is allowed only in self-defence. Thus the erstwhile Department of War became the Department of Defence in 1947 to comply with the Charter's prohibition, also indicating that from then on, force would only be used in defence — even if anticipatory defence. Thus the Trump administration's decision to rename it last year was deliberate — a warning of sorts about what was to come in the days ahead — in open defiance of the Charter's prohibition of acts of aggression or attempts to occupy a foreign land through a declared war. That has regrettably happened in the case of Venezuela, and is happening in the case of Greenland. It is likely to happen in Iran, and Canada has been threatened as well. Hence Greenlanders, Danes, Europeans and the rest of the leaders are at a loss and trying to figure out how they should respond to a violation of a norm that each of the 195 world states willingly and voluntarily agreed to, implemented, acted upon, relied upon and fully believed in for over seven decades. It had been so fundamental and central to global peace and security that no state dare construe it otherwise.

As if this weren't enough, President Trump's memorandum dated Jan 7, 2026, directs the executive branch to start taking steps to withdraw from 66 international bodies. Global governance institutions are not passive or symbolic arenas; they are places where deliberations take place, where norms are shaped, which are gradually transformed into binding frameworks. When the US withdraws, it does not remove itself from the effects of global rules; instead, it removes itself from the leadership of the process by which those rules are written and interpreted. The most immediate consequence of the US withdrawal is the creation of a strategic vacuum. China, Russia and other important developing countries have shown a sustained preference for remaining inside multilateral institutions.

From the perspective of US competitors then, the American withdrawal is not a setback but an opportunity. When the US exits, it effectively hands over agenda-setting power, reduces contestation, and allows alternative visions of the international order to gain legitimacy. Here, it opens up no less a serious opportunity for coordinated developing countries' blocs, such as the G77 or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, that can increase their influence when a major agenda-setter withdraws. These legal platforms offer opportunities to developing countries to come together and steer these bodies perhaps even better.

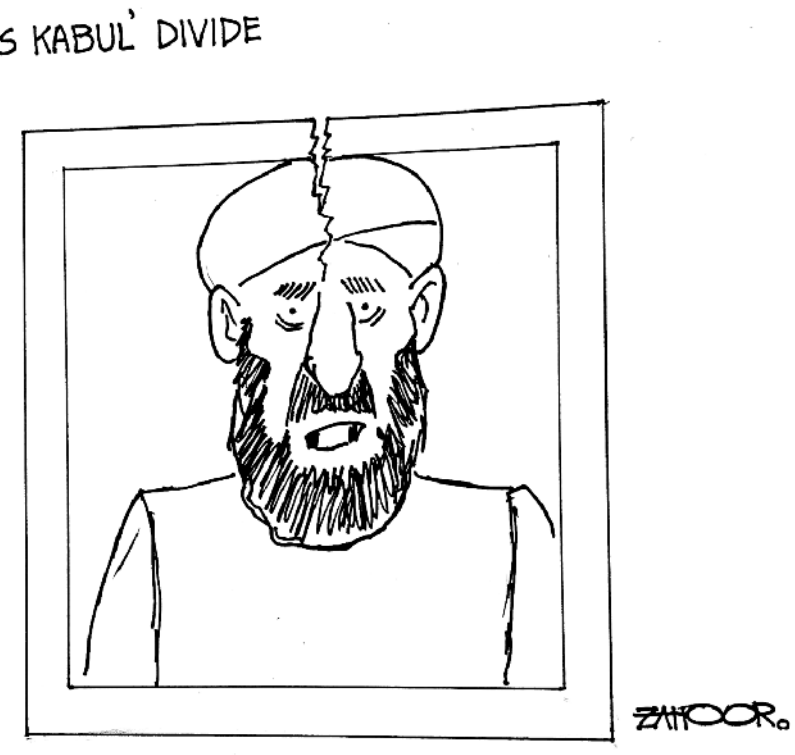
Those who keep a track of international politics and law recall how despite US reservations, developing countries negotiated the well-known 1982 Law of the Sea Convention that regulated the traditional freedom of the high seas. Mining control over minerals, platinum, rare earths, and other material in the deep seabed, despite objections from the US, was conferred on the International Seabed Authority by the developing countries.

Another example where developing states found their way was the establishment of the International Criminal Court through the Rome Statute. It is still openly opposed by the US. Yet it is established, has handed down 11 convictions after lengthy trials, issued around 60 arrest warrants, and there are 12 investigations ongoing. Apart from that, there are numerous examples of how several international treaties and frameworks have been finalised and continue to function despite reservations from the US.

The long-term costs of withdrawal from international bodies are cumulative and may be invisible in the short term to the Trump administration. By withdrawing, the US does not shield itself from these developments; it merely loses the ability to shape them at an early stage. Historically, American influence has rested not only on material power but also on its capacity to convene allies, bridge divides between developed and developing states, and steer multilateral outcomes. Re-entry, when it occurs, rarely restores previous influence automatically; it often requires concessions and a rebuilding of credibility.

Speaking to the BBC last week, I had stated that the norm of non-intervention is actually being solidified even more despite its breach by the Trump administration at present. Notice how the entire world, all regions, all states representing diverse civilisations have stood up in protest. The norm against war, against non-intervention is not merely a law laid down in 1945; it represents a multi-civilisational maturity achieved after thousands of years of bloodshed and infighting for territorial gains. It's not regional hegemony at stake only but a civilisational loss that every state raising voice against the Trump administration's actions is trying to prevent. ■

The writer is a former caretaker federal law minister.



BY AISHA KHAN

The Ring

THE modern industrial economy rests on a narrow and increasingly fragile base of critical resources. Energy fuels, industrial metals, rare earth elements, semiconductors, water and arable land are no longer just inputs to growth; they are instruments of power. Oil and gas still shape geopolitics, but lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper and advanced chips now determine who controls the technologies of the future — from electric mobility and renewable energy to artificial intelligence and modern warfare. When access to these resources is disrupted, economies stall, inflation surges and political stability erodes.

History offers little comfort. States have always pursued resources beyond their borders, often disguising material ambition behind ideology or security narratives. The annexation of Alsace-Lorraine was about coal and iron as much as nationalism. Japan's expansion into Manchuria was driven by minerals and industrial survival. Control over Middle Eastern oil shaped alliances, coups and wars throughout the 20th century. These were not aberrations; they were rational responses by states operating under scarcity and competition.

What distinguishes the present moment is the intensity. The global population is larger, consumption is higher and ecological limits are closing in. Climate change is degrading land and water systems while accelerating demand for transition minerals. At the same time, new trade routes and strategic corridors are emerging. Control over ports, undersea cables, logistics hubs and mineral processing capacity now matters as much as territorial control once did. Value chains are the new battlefields.

States are responding in predictable but dangerous ways. Some pursue direct acquisition through force or coercion, betting that strategic assets outweigh diplomatic isolation. Others seek control through ownership — buying mines, farmland, ports and firms abroad to secure supply invisibly. A third group relies on indirect dominance: financing infrastructure, extending security guarantees, shaping standards and locking partners into asymmetric dependence. Whether through invasion, acquisition or influence, the logic is identical — security through control.

This is the political soil in which populist leaders flourish. They instinctively understand a hard truth: politics mirror human emotions more than rational calculation.

They succeed not because societies misunderstand reality, but because they know that the lure and promise of personal safety and comfort overrides concerns about disruption and destruction in distant lands. In an age of insecurity — economic volatility, cultural anxiety, climate stress — people respond to leaders who echo their fears and promise protection. When offered stability, energy security or jobs, abstract moral costs fade. The concept of justice and fair play matter little when immediate survival feels at stake. Populism is not an ideological anomaly; it is a mirror.

> Have we arrived at this perilous moment because we covet too much?

At the core of this moment lies the darker truth about human nature. We frame global politics as contests between systems, but it is equally a struggle between restraint and desire. Tolkien understood this. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring does not tempt villains alone. It seduces the well-intentioned by offering power to "set things right". Each bearer believes they can control it. Each is wrong. The Ring corrupts not because its holders are evil, but because they are human.

Our age is filled with Rings. Critical minerals. Energy corridors. Strategic chokepoints. Technological dominance. Each promises security and prosperity. Each demands moral compromise. Nations convince themselves that exceptional circumstances justify exceptional actions — that rules apply to others, not to them. In doing so, they repeat the oldest mistake in political history: believing power can be wielded without cost.

Have we arrived at this perilous moment because we covet too much? Because we have drifted from collectivism towards an aggressive individualism, where nations behave like individuals hoarding wealth and security regardless of the cost to others? The global order once aspired — however imperfectly — to shared rules, mutual restraint and collective benefit. Today, those norms are fraying, replaced by transactional bargains and zero-sum thinking.

The tragedy is that this path is chosen consciously, applauded domestically, and repeated globally, until restraint is seen as weakness and morality as a luxury no nation can afford in an unforgiving world. The Ring, however, does not merely dominate; it deforms the soul of its bearer.

This is where the Faustian bargain becomes unavoidable. Like Faust, modern societies trade restraint for advantage, ethics for efficiency, long-term stability for short-term gain. The bargain feels rational, even necessary. But Faust's tragedy was not ignorance; it was arrogance — the belief that consequences could be managed later.

The final warning is not abstract. A world organised around domination of resources will not stabilise; it will harden. Arms races will follow supply chains. Borders will be redrawn around minerals and water. Climate stress will magnify inequality and conflict. And the moral corrosion will run inward, hollowing societies that justify injustice in the name of security. What we are witnessing is human nature laid bare, stripped of the fragile veneer of civilisation that once concealed its darker impulses behind the illusion of civility.

The battle unfolding is not only between states, but a reflection of the eternal conflict between good and evil within human choice. Seizing the Ring may bring power, but it also binds the bearer to its curse. Democracy and multipolarity, then, are not merely political arrangements; they are moral expressions of our humanity; systems that acknowledge fellowship over domination. The warning is clear: a world built on fear, greed and domination may achieve temporary security, but it will ultimately consume itself. ■

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